



Partnering with Persons with Disabilities in WASH Design and Construction in Timor-Leste

FN/08D/2023

Summary

Partnering with an organization of persons with disabilities (OPD) in Timor-Leste provided the UNICEF WASH programme with essential skills and expertise to strengthen the accessibility of new and existing WASH infrastructure. Persons with different types of disabilities teamed up with UNICEF WASH engineers to assess infrastructure, providing firsthand user insights and recommendations for the designs. Working with the WASH team had a catalytic impact with the scope of the partnership expanded to also assess and improve the accessibility of youth centres and the office of the Secretary of State for Youth and Sports in Timor-Leste. Improving the accessibility of infrastructure, including WASH facilities, in public places is critical to ensure persons with disabilities can participate equally in society.

Background

During the past decade, the UNICEF water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programme in Timor-Leste has been focused on rural water and sanitation as well as hygiene, contributing to child survival and development. Implementation modalities have been based on behaviour change communication and community-based approaches targeting communities to be open defecation free and management of gravity fed rural water systems.

During the response to COVID-19 to strengthen infection prevention and control, UNICEF switched to support for infrastructure interventions, such as handwashing stations. These WASH infrastructure interventions were designed for critical public places and institutions such as healthcare facilities, schools, and social care and youth facilities. The COVID-19 response provided new resources for under-funded programme areas such as WASH in healthcare facilities and WASH in schools. To bridge longstanding gaps, UNICEF incorporated comprehensive

infrastructure design principles in COVID-19 response projects in public domains. This paved the way to creating inclusive designs with provisions and features specifically to cater to WASH needs related to disabilities, gender, children and the environment.

Box 1

Children with disabilities in Timor-Leste

Children with disabilities in Timor-Leste are 'subjected to widespread discrimination, neglect, and abuse, lack access to education and health care, and are not integrated effectively in all areas of social life.'¹ There is a significant lack of public awareness regarding the rights of children with disabilities, and schools, residential, sports and leisure facilities lack adequate accommodations for children with disabilities, especially in rural areas.² Timorese children with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing education, particularly for girls with disabilities; 55 per cent of girls and women with disabilities, aged 5-24 years, have never attended school.³

At the time of the emergence of COVID-19, Timor-Leste was progressing towards achieving nationwide basic water and sanitation services by the end of 2025. There had been some improvement in the enabling environment in making provisions for inclusive WASH, for example the development of inclusion

¹ United Nations. (2015). *Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women* (Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of Timor-Leste).

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/817146?ln=en>

² Ibid

guidelines in national WASH in health care facilities. However, there had not been progress in allocating resources to implement those provisions for persons with disabilities, especially pertaining to WASH infrastructure. The pandemic further restricted access to basic WASH services for persons with disabilities. This was particularly the case when accessing public, common and shared facilities, persons with disabilities faced increased vulnerability due to the pandemic and that resulted in greater exclusion and isolation. Renewed attention and resources for WASH infrastructure improvements provided an opportunity to address both the longstanding and immediate deprivations and barriers, including those related to disability.

Disability-accessible WASH infrastructure

To initiate these improvements, UNICEF established a team of five young engineers to plan and execute the WASH infrastructure component under the COVID-19 response. They created new designs that included disability accessibility. However, it soon became apparent that it would be important to involve persons with disabilities to better understand their WASH needs and preferences. As a result, in 2021 UNICEF established a collaborative partnership with an organization of persons with disabilities (OPD), Associacao Naroman Ba Futuro (ANBF) or Light for the Future Association.

³ United Nations. (2021). *Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women*. (Fourth periodic report submitted by Timor-Leste under article 18 of the Convention, due in 2021).

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Box 2

What is OPD?

Organizations of persons with disabilities or OPDs are organizations that are led, directed and governed by persons with disabilities. The majority of their members are persons with disabilities. They are established with the aim of collectively acting, expressing, promoting, pursuing and/or defending the rights of persons with disabilities.

The objective of the partnership with ANBF was to utilise persons with disabilities' lived experience and expertise on disability to review and conduct assessments of existing WASH services in select public places to identify barriers and gaps and provide recommendations including new designs. Recognizing the importance of comprehensive accessibility, the partnership objective was expanded beyond WASH to also cover accessibility of general infrastructure at a given premises. The partnership assessed the accessibility of premises, such as youth centres, including both existing and designs for new infrastructure.

The engagement of the WASH team and ANBF in assessing ongoing renovations of the office of the Secretary of State for Youth and Sports (SSYS) successfully resulted in accessibility being considered in renovations. UNICEF's Social Policy Consultant (a person with a disability) also joined the team to work with ANBF on the infrastructure accessibility improvements of youth centres and the SSYS office.

Figure 1: UNICEF and ANBF Programme Document Signing



Source: ©UNICEF/Timor-Leste

Disability-accessible WASH infrastructure

The ANBF team working with UNICEF to assess infrastructure consisted of the following persons, including three persons with disabilities:

- One person with vision impairment
- One person who uses a wheelchair
- One person with mobility impairment who uses crutches
- Secretary of ANBF
- President of ANBF

The process of working in partnership with ANBF was as follows:

1. Consultative meetings with the ANBF team and UNICEF WASH Engineers. These discussions briefed ANBF on the objectives of planned work and proposed inclusive design concepts, which ANBF provided feedback on.
2. Visits to identified premises and assessment of infrastructure through user experience by ANBF team. Visits were facilitated by

UNICEF WASH Engineers and the caretakers of the respective premises.

3. Feedback by ANBF team via a report reflecting firsthand user experience of persons with different types of disabilities and proposing improvements to make it more accessible.
4. UNICEF WASH Engineers improving designs to incorporate ANBF's feedback.
5. UNICEF WASH Engineers budgeting the proposed improvements.
6. UNICEF allocating budget (within the project limits) and leveraging government budget to implement the proposed improvements.
7. Joint inspection by UNICEF WASH Engineers and ANBF to monitor accessibility during construction and after the completion of the improvements.

The partnership between UNICEF and ANBF covered the assessment of both new and existing infrastructure. In the case of new infrastructure, UNICEF WASH Engineers developed detailed drawings, including 3D views and explained the design rationale to the ANBF team. Feedback from the ANBF team was incorporated into the redesign to improve the design in terms of accessibility and disability inclusion. Subsequently, UNICEF WASH Engineers and the ANBF team visited the actual premises to monitor during and after the construction.

Value of partnership with an OPD

Establishing a new partnership for UNICEF

The partnership itself was an achievement as it was the first formal partnership with an OPD for the UNICEF Timor-Leste Country Office. It has set a positive example for both UNICEF staff, partners and owners of the respective premises (government institutions) on inclusiveness, participatory planning, empowerment, and respect for the viewpoint of persons with disabilities.

Building the capacity and profile of OPDs

UNICEF has built the capacity of an organization dedicated to persons with disabilities by creating opportunities to influence major decisions related to inclusive environment and infrastructure, as well as raising the profile of OPDs, particularly with government.

Recognition of the importance of partnership with OPDs

For ANBF, it was an opportunity to enter a partnership with an UN agency with due recognition, equity and engage in UN programme and partnership protocols. Partnerships provide a more equitable basis for engagement, as opposed to informal consultations which tend to take a top-down approach.

Diverse geographical coverage in assessments

It was planned to assess 15 facilities / premises across five municipalities including the capital municipality Dili where both UNICEF and ANBF are

based. At the end of the partnership, nine facilities / premises across four municipalities were assessed with one to three inspection visits required to each location. Assessments of health centres

in Viqueque municipality were cancelled due to local travel restrictions associated with COVID-19. The table and map below summarize the joint assessments conducted during the partnership.

Table 1: Joint Assessments of infrastructure with persons with disabilities from ANBF

Premises / Facility	# Planned	# Assessed	Type of Assessment	Geographical Location
Public Market	3	3	New and existing WASH infrastructure	Dili and Manatuto
Youth Centre and Office	5	4	Existing infrastructure (entire building, not just WASH facilities)	Dili and Bobonaro
Health Centre	5	0	New and existing WASH infrastructure	Viqueque
Border Entry Point	2	2	New WASH infrastructure	Covalima and Bobonaro

Figure 2: Map showing the location of assessments in Timor-Leste



Source: ©UNICEF/Timor-Leste

Long-term impacts of the partnership

- Three youth centres and improvements to the office of Secretary of State for Youth and Sports (SSYS) have costed improvements plans with provision

for disability and gender inclusion based on firsthand user experience and feedback from persons with disabilities. UNICEF’s Social Policy programme was able to contribute funding to implement the improvements at SSYS and is advocating the government to leveraging resources for others.

- Due to the partnership, the SSYS office including the WASH facilities is a more inclusive and accessible centre for girls and boys with disabilities. During the 2021 floods in Timor-Leste, the SSYS office was used as a headquarters for youth mobilization. The accessibility improvements have removed barriers for young people with disabilities to participate in youth

activism in future emergency responses. Further UNICEF worked with SSYS to develop a [guidance on the rights to participation of adolescents and youth with disabilities in Timor-Leste](#). The guidance identifies barriers for participation and provides practical guidance for identifying and facilitating meaningful participation of adolescents and youth with disabilities.

- Access to WASH facilities in public places, like markets, for men and women with disabilities were assessed and improvements made, which will support with participation of persons with disabilities in society. It has set an example on the importance of accessible public places to support participation of persons with disabilities and the attainment of other rights, such as employment and livelihoods.
- One public market has a new disability-accessible toilet block (with three cubicles), a new child-friendly and disability-accessible handwashing station (with four taps) and an improved water storage and distribution system. The same interventions at a larger scale have been planned for another public market. Having accessible handwashing stations in public locations can reduce illness for persons with disabilities and increase their health and wellbeing, as well as equal participation in the community.
- Seven Community Health Centres (CHCs) have new disability-accessible and gender segregated toilet blocks (each with two cubicles), new child-friendly and disability-accessible handwashing stations (each with four taps) and improved water storage and distribution systems. In addition, minor improvements have been undertaken improving accessibility of WASH facilities in 17 more CHCs. Many persons with disabilities have higher health needs due to their impairment as well as having equal rights to healthcare. Accessible WASH facilities in healthcare centres are a critical component of ensuring that persons with disabilities can access quality healthcare on an equal basis as others.
- Two entry points along the border between Indonesia and Timor-Leste have new disability-accessible and gender segregated toilet blocks (each with seven cubicles and six urinals), two new child-friendly and disability-accessible handwashing stations (each with six taps) and improved water storage and distribution systems. Quality assurance visits were conducted following the completion of construction.
- The new WASH facility designs for markets, CHC and entry points included disability inclusion and gender sensitive considerations based on the lived experiences and feedback from persons with disabilities.

Figure 3: Disability-accessible toilet block designed for and constructed at border entry points



Source: ©UNICEF/Timor-Leste

Figure 4: Disability-accessible toilet block designed for and constructed at community health centres



Source: ©UNICEF/Timor-Leste

Figure 5: Disability-accessible toilet block designed for and constructed at public markets



Source: ©UNICEF/Timor-Leste

Challenges

- The OPD, ANBF, lacked capacity in proposal writing, budgeting and reporting. UNICEF staff assisted and guided ANBF staff in this regard, supporting them to meet the requirements for the partnership. Building ANBF's overall capacity is a progressive follow up action.
- COVID-19 surges during the partnership resulted in increased risks to persons with disabilities' health and wellbeing, particularly given the need to travel and interact with people during assessments. UNICEF put in place COVID-19 protocols. For example, the number of persons in a vehicle during field visits was limited to three with additional vehicles deployed. All standard COVID-19 protocols (i.e., hand hygiene, face masks, etc.) were followed during the visits. All ANBF and UNICEF staff followed vaccine requirements prior to all visits. The COVID-19 precautions and protocols resulted in the project timeframe being extended with a no cost extension granted.
- Disability assessments and related costing for improvements created false expectations among some of the government partners of possible funding from UNICEF to undertake the improvements. UNICEF utilized available funds to upgrade WASH facilities assessed in public places and community health centres as well as the SSYS office. However, there wasn't funding available for the remaining youth centres, with partners briefed on the funding limitations.

Lessons learnt

- Persons with disabilities are their own best advocates and can be influential in lobbying for accessibility and inclusion during built environment planning and implementation.
- OPDs require dedicated organizational and skills development to function on par with more established CSOs and NGOs.
- Formally established partnerships with OPDs makes it easier and more efficient to access their skills, knowledge and expertise as well as being empowering for the persons with disabilities involved. Partnerships with OPDs also provide financial compensation for the expertise and insights of persons with disabilities.
- When compared to more established NGOs, research institutions and think tanks, the partnership with ANBF represented high value for money. Engaging with OPDs has extremely high returns when a programme has limited budget, while also raising the profile and providing professional recognition of the OPD.
- The partnership between WASH and ANBF had a catalytic impact. While initially focused on WASH, the partnership was expanded to strengthen disability accessibility and inclusion in the youth and social sectors.

References

United Nations. (2015). *Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women* (Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of Timor-Leste).
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Acknowledgements

Colleagues from UNICEF Timor-Leste Country Office made the development of this case study possible by providing substantial information and contributions. The authors extend sincere gratitude to: Emmanuelle Collet (Chief of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation & Social Policy, UNICEF Timor-Leste Country Office), Apolonia Barreto (WASH Officer, UNICEF Timor-Leste Country Office), Jose Manuel Do Karmo (Consultant, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation & Social Policy, UNICEF Timor-Leste

Country Office), Brooke Yamakoshi (WASH Specialist, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office) and Lieve Sabbe (Disability Specialist, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office), Anu Paudyal Gautam, Knowledge management Specialist, UNICEF HQ for their reviews.

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Annex 1: Photo Gallery

Assessing an existing youth centre in Bobonaro.



Source: ©UNICEF/Timor-Leste

Assessing new WASH infrastructure at the border entry point in Bobonaro.



Source: ©UNICEF/Timor-Leste

Ramps added to the office of the SSYS.



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UNICEF WASH Engineers and ANBF team discussing WASH upgrades for a public market in Dili.



Source: ©UNICEF/Timor-Leste

Assessing existing WASH infrastructure at a public market in Dili.



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Signage at the office of the SSYS.



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About the Series

UNICEF's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) country teams work inclusively with governments, civil society partners and donors, to improve WASH services for children and adolescents, and the families and caregivers who support them. UNICEF works in over 100 countries worldwide to improve water and sanitation services, as well as basic hygiene practices. This publication is part of the UNICEF WASH Learning Series, designed to contribute to knowledge of good practice across UNICEF's WASH programming. In this series:

Discussion Papers explore the significance of new and emerging topics with limited evidence or understanding, and the options for action and further exploration.

Fact Sheets summarize the most important knowledge on a topic in few pages in the form of graphics, tables and bullet points, serving as a briefing for staff on a topical issue.

Field Notes share innovations in UNICEF's WASH programming, detailing its experiences implementing these innovations in the field.

Guidelines describe a specific methodology for WASH programming, research or evaluation, drawing on substantive evidence, and based on UNICEF's and partners' experiences in the field.

Reference Guides present systematic reviews on topics with a developed evidence base or they compile different case studies to indicate the range of experience associated with a specific topic.

Technical Papers present the result of more in-depth research and evaluations, advancing WASH knowledge and theory of change on a key topic.

WASH Diaries explore the personal dimensions of users of WASH services, and remind us why a good standard of water, sanitation and hygiene is important for all to enjoy. Through personal reflections, this series also offers an opportunity for tapping into the rich reservoir of tacit knowledge of UNICEF's WASH staff in bringing results for children.

WASH Results show with solid evidence how UNICEF is achieving the goals outlined in Country Programme Documents, Regional Organizational Management Plans, and the Global Strategic Plan or WASH Strategy, and contributes to our understanding of the WASH theory of change or theory of action.

COVID-19 WASH Responses compile lessons learned on UNICEF's COVID-19 response and how to ensure continuity of WASH services and supplies during and after the pandemic.

Readers are encouraged to quote from this publication but UNICEF requests due acknowledgement. You can learn more about UNICEF's work on WASH here:

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Document No: **WASH/FN/08D/202**